



DR. MAHATHIR

Among the biggest headaches of the Education portfolio is the sorting and re-sorting of teachers' salaries. Before the implementation of the recommendations of the Aziz Commission Report, there were 500 different salary scales for teachers. These were reduced to 11 — a welcome simplification and unification, but one that left certain groups of teachers dissatisfied, mainly over differentials. The Ministry has since received 114 separate demands from teachers for salary scale revisions. Two have been partially

met. What will be the fate of the other 112, and of the recommendations of the Ibrahim Ali Report? Education Minister Dr. Mahathir Mohamed talks to New Straits Times writer Adibah Amin about these and salary-increase demands in general in the context of the nation's economic situation. If the Government decided to meet these demands, it would have to cut down on development or raise taxes. Either way, says Dr. Mahathir, "it is the people who suffer, the poorest the most."

Teachers' pay

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Dr. Mahathir on his big headache

Question: What are the chances of teachers getting the improved salary scales they are asking for?

Dr. Mahathir: "Improved salary scales" is hardly the phrase for it. They are asking for higher salaries, yes. There are now 114 separate more-pay demands from teachers. I have half-solved two. One costs the Government \$12 million in back pay, the other \$18 million. The increase in recurrent expenditure is around \$10 million a year.

Our teachers are very far from being poorly paid. Compare their salaries with those of teachers in countries of about the same GNP, and they have nothing to complain about. Compare what they get with what people in other occupations get in this country — people with the same qualifications — and in most cases teachers are much better off.

The dissatisfaction comes when one group of teachers compares its pay with that of another group of teachers — a question of differentials.

One group feels it should get higher pay than another because of its higher qualifications.

The second group, on its part, feels it should

get higher pay than the first because it has more experience.

A third group feels its heavier responsibilities entitle it to higher pay than the other two.

It is natural to place a higher value on what one has than on what the other chap has, be it qualifications, experience, or amount of responsibility.

Before the Aziz Commission revision, there were 500 different salary scales for teachers. The revision reduced these to 11.

Teachers are of course happy with the upward revision of salaries. But some groups of teachers are not happy with the amounts of pay increase they get.

They look up and down and around, compare what they get with what other groups of teachers get, and feel they should have had more.

There is no solving it to everyone's satisfaction. Increase one group's pay and immediately several

other groups claim they merit a similar increase.

And with the present economic situation, any more increase in teachers' pay would mean less money for development in education. The nation would suffer.

Question: Would not the nation suffer if teachers left for higher-paying jobs in the private sector or stayed on but could not give of their best because of half-conscious feelings of frustration?

Frustrations

Dr. Mahathir: Teachers do leave for higher-paying jobs in the private sector, but the numbers are not alarming and are not likely ever to be.

As for the argument that a teacher dissatisfied with his pay lacks motivation to teach well, I would rather have adequate numbers of not-so well-motivated teachers than inadequate numbers of highly motivated teachers.

The most highly motivated teacher cannot do much with today's enormous 50-pupil primary classes.

Our aim is to train and employ enough teachers to reduce class size to 35 pupils. Money should be spent on this rather than on motivating teachers by increasing their salaries.

Already teachers' salaries take up 68 per cent of the total education allocation. If, say, the recommendations of the

teachers' salaries can be increased without lessening the portion for development.

Even if we could — education already accounts for a big percentage of national expenditure it would, in the present financial situation, involve cutting down on someone else's allocation. Or raising taxes.

And you know what that means: The people, not the Government, would be paying for the salary increase.

Question: Are you saying then that there should be no salary increase, for people in other jobs as well as for teachers? What about people in the lowest salary scales. They are the worst sufferers from the inflation. They do not pay income tax, and so would not be consoled by the thought that higher salaries would only mean higher taxes.

Dr. Mahathir: They should be helped to see that though they do not pay income tax, higher taxes would affect them even more than those who do. When business and industry have to pay

There are not many jobs in the private sector that offer teachers, for their qualifications, a better deal than what they are getting in the education service.

Anyway, you cannot stop people leaving by increasing their pay. If the private sector want someone from the Government service badly enough, they can afford to offer him a salary the Government cannot beat. You just have to make provision for a number of such losses when you train teachers.

We plan to increase the number of teachers in the country from 80,000 to 120,000 in 10 years. Making allowance for losses, this means training about 60,000 new teachers.

In the long run this, and not an increase in salaries, will prove to be the economical and effective solution.

Ibrahim Ali Report were accepted and implemented, there would be an increase of 10.5 per cent. This does not take into account the more-pay demands now being negotiated.

If we kept spending bigger and bigger percentages of the education allocation on teachers' salaries, where would the money come from for more pressing needs. Some schools, for example, badly need replacing.

Expenditure

The all-round standard of schools needs to be improved: the primary schools, particularly, if we are not to keep on losing and damaging the nation's brain potential through poor early education.

Some may say: Get a bigger education allocation, then, so that

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higher taxes, they make it up in higher prices, which are passed right down the line.

True, the poor are the worst sufferers from the inflation. Just as truly, they would be the worst sufferers from the higher prices that result from attempts to combat inflation through salary increase.

Am I saying that it would be unwise to increase salaries of people in other jobs as teachers? Yes, I am. You cannot beat inflation by raising salaries. It is a race the wage-earner always loses. Their only way to fight inflation is to spend less.

Whether the Government gets the money for salary increases by raising taxes or by cutting down on development, it is the people who suffer, the poorest the most.